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ABSTRACT

A study examined the relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and self-disclosure. Subjects were 419 college students who completed the Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale and the Self-Disclosure Situations Survey. The results indicated that rhetorical sensitivity and self-disclosure were inversely related. Rhetorically sensitive individuals did not alter their low levels of self-disclosure, regardless of the setting and the length of the relationship between themselves and the other person. Rhetorical sensitivity appeared to be a measure of interpersonal communication moderation rather than interpersonal communication competence. (RL)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RHETORICAL SENSITIVITY AND SELF-DISCLOSURE

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Interpersonal communication competence has been of concern to researchers for over twenty years.[1] Little agreement on the definition and measurement of interpersonal competence exists. A review of six conceptualizations and attempts to measure interpesonal communication competence reveals little commonality. The six approaches include a total of 18 different dimensions; only six dimensions are common to more than one conceptualization; and the perspectives vary from three to six factors each.[2] Although these instruments do not appear to hold common factors, Phelps and Snavely performed a factor analysis on them and extracted five factors: empathy, social anxiety, listening, self-disclosure, and health.[3]

Hart recently expressed interest in interpersonal communication competence measurement in the development of the Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale. Hart and his colleagues had, as their purpose, to define "that type of rhetorical sensitivity which we feel makes effective social interaction manifestly possible."[4] Hart defines the rhetorically sensitive person as someone who characterizes himself or herself as 'an undulating, fluctuating entity, always unsure, always guessing, continually weighing."[5] He distinguishes the rhetorically sensitive person as someone who

> (1) tries to accept role-taking as part of the human condition, (2) attempts to avoid stylized verbal behavior, (3) is characteristically willing to undergo the strain of adaptation, (4) seeks to distinguish between all information and information acceptable for communication, and (5) tries to understand that an idea can be rendered in multiform ways.[6]

The Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale provides measures of the rhetorical sensitive person, "noble selves" who see "any variation from their personal norms as hypocritical, as a denial of integrity, as a cardinal sin"[7] and the "rhetorical reflector" who has "no self to call his or her own."[8]

Hart provided demographic data which appears to define the three communication styles. The rhetorically sensitive person is more likely to be male than female, to be rich rather than poor, to be low instead of high in ethnic identification, and to be Republican or independent rather than a Democrat. Noble selves are not distinguished by gender, but are more likely to be Democrats rather than Republicans, more likely to be found in the eastern United States, to live in urban rather than suburban or rural areas, to come from less financially secure families, and to prize their ethnic identification. In contrast, the rhetorical reflectors are more likely to be female, old, conservative, non-Jewish, laborers, non-easterners, and churchgoers.[9]

The Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale is not readily factor analyzable because each item may measure one or more of the three communication styles and the responses to the items are weighted differentially. Consequently, it is difficult to ascertain whether it measures the same dimensions measured by other interpersonal competence instruments. Hart's "effective social interaction" was hypothesized to be similar to Bem's "psychological health," in a recent study, but a relationship between the two could not be established. The study suggested that rhetorical sensitivity might be a more narrow construct than interpersonal communication competence and might simply be a measurement of assertiveness or another communication variable.[10]

Self-disclosure, one of the dimensions that appears to be shared by interpersonal competence measures, has been studied in depth by communication researchers. Self-disclosure is defined as verbal revelations of self to others[11] and is characterized by honesty, intentionality, and a willingness to share personal information.[12] Jourard related self-disclosure to the "healthy interpersonal relationship" in which "an individual is willing and able to communicate all of his real self to the other person."[13] While Jourard felt that open communication promoted growth, current researchers are less enthusiastic about prescribing self-disclosure for all relationships.

Two recent researchers offer a caveat, ". . . the communication of intimacies is a behavior which has positive effects only in limited, appropriate circumstances. . . . 'the transparent self' is not, perhaps, the ideal model for all people."[14]

Self-disclosure behavior generally develops slowly and occurs most appropriately within established relationships. When intimate disclosures are inappropriately timed, they can be perceived as maladjustment or inappropriate socialization[15] Subjects have demonstrated a preference for low self-disclosure when conversing with strangers.[16] Jourard explained the tendency to disclose in established relationships as the "dyadic effect" which means that the more information we receive, the greater the willingness to disclose.[17] The "dyadic effect" has been demonstrated in a number of studies.[18] Based on this research, the following research question is posed:

Q_1: Do rhetorically sensitive people distinguish between friends and strangers in their self-disclosure behavior?

Self-disclosure may occur in dyads or in a small group setting. The nature of self-disclosure, however, renders it particularly appropriate for dyadic interaction. Jourard's "dyadic effect" suggests the predominance of self-disclosure in dyads. Most research on self-disclosure has

been limited to the dyad.[19] The frequently quoted definition of self-disclosure, "Any information about himself which Person A communicates verbally to a Person B,"[20] similarly suggests that two people are involved in self-disclosure. These theoretical suggestions lead to a second research question:

Q_2: Do rhetorically sensitive people distinguish between the dyad and the small group in their self-disclosure behavior?

Rhetorical sensitivity may represent interpersonal communication competence or it may merely represent moderation in communication. Hart found a high inverse correlation between the rhetorical sensitivity scale and the scale that measures noble self. This tends to support the notion that rhetorical sensitivity may simply be the flip side of unconditional self-disclosure. The scoring of the instrument similarly suggests that rhetorical sensitivity may merely measure moderation since a person scores high on rhetorical sensitivity if he or she regularly marks the mid-point of a 7-point likert scale. In order to determine if rhetorical sensitivity measures the fluctuating, flexible behavior posited by Hart or if it simply measures moderation, the following research questions were posed:

Q_3: Do rhetorically sensitive individuals self-disclose differently in dyads than do individuals low in rhetorical sensitivity?

Q_4: Do rhetorically sensitive individuals self-disclose differently in small groups than do individuals low in rhetorical sensitivity?

Q_5: Do rhetorically sensitive individuals self-disclose differently with friends than do individuals low in rhetorical sensitivity?

Q_6: Do rhetorically sensitive individuals self-disclose differently with strangers than do individuals low in rhetorical sensitivity?

Q_7: Do rhetorically sensitive individuals self-disclose differently, in general, than do individuals low in rhetorical sensitivity?

Self-disclosure, once viewed as a universal recommendation, has been refined in the last ten years to function more appropriately in certain situations and with certain relationships. Similarly, the concept has moved from a unidimensional to a multidimensional concept.[21] Research has pointed up the importance of considering such variables as the person to whom the disclosure is made (the target person) and the length of the relationship.[22]

Sex differences is an unstable area in the self-disclosure literature. Jourard's early studies demonstrated consistent sex differences in self-disclosure. He found that females disclosed significantly more than males.[23] More recent research on sex differences in self-disclosure has been equivocal. Many studies have found that females

disclose more than males;[24] a number have found a similar amount of self-disclosure among males and females;[25] and two have found that males disclose more than females.[26]

Intervening variables such as timing and target person may explain these conflicting results. Timing of self-disclosure has been suggested as a possible explanation for differences in male/female self-disclosure. Men disclose information earlier in relationship development than do women;[27] men disclose information regarding power and potency earlier than women;[28] and men self-disclose more to strangers than do women.[29] In order to verify these earlier findings, the following hypothesis was generated:

H_1: Men self-disclose more to strangers than women self-disclose to strangers.

Another intervening variable is what determines who can receive a confidence and when that confidence can be offered. Men are influenced in their self-disclosure by the degree to which their companions confide in them,[30] while women disclose more to people they like and less to those they dislike.[31] Apparently, men are not socialized to disclose to friends. In light of these findings, the following hypothesis were posed:

H_2: Women will self-disclose more to friends than men will self-disclose to friends.

H_3: Women will self-disclose more to friends relative to strangers than men will self-disclose to friends relative to strangers.

METHOD

Data Collection

Subjects were 419 students, 208 men and 211 women, enrolled in introductory speech communication courses at a large midwestern university. Each subject completed the Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale and the Self-Disclosure Situations Survey. To help control for order effects, half of the subjects completed the Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale first and half of the subjects completed the Self-Disclosure Situations Survey first.

Measures

The Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale is based on the conceptions of the rhetorically sensitive, noble self, and rhetorical reflector provided above. The scale allows independent measurement of these three types and subjects are classified as rhetorically sensitive, noble self, or rhetorical reflector. The self-report instrument includes forty items which each offer five likert-type options to the respondents, but the choices are weighted differentially.

Twenty-eight items measure rhetorical sensitivity. For example, a subject responding "sometimes true" to the following items would be scored as rhetorically sensitive: "If you're sure you're right, you should argue with a person who disagrees with you," If people would open up to each other the world would be better off," and "If a man cheats on his wife, he should tell her." Twenty-four items measure rhetorical reflector. For instance, a subject responding

"almost never true" to the following items would be scored as rhetorically reflective: "A supervisor in a work situation must be forceful in his or ner communication with subordinates to be effective," "You should tell someone if you think they are giving you bad advice," and "Saying what you think is a sign of friendship." Twenty-four items measure noble self. For example, a subject responding "almost always true" to the following items would be scored as noble self: "When someone has an irritating habit, they should be told about it," "A person who speaks his or her gut feelings is to be admired," and "A friend who has bad breath should be told about it." Twelve items serve as fillers: "An idea can be communicated in many different ways," "When talking to others, you should drop all your defenses," and "No matter how hard you try, you just can't make friends with everyone." Single items on the rhetorical sensitivity scale may measure one dimension of rhetorical sensitivity or may measure two or three of the communication types. Internal and test-retest reliability as well as criterion-related validity have been reported.[32]

The Self-Disclosure Situations Survey is a relatively new self-report measure of self-disclosure containing 20 items. A total self-disclosure score is derived from subtotal scores for self-disclosure in dyads, in small group settings, to friends, and to strangers.

The instrument measures the social-situational determinants of self-disclosure. Chelune reports test-retest reliability coefficients for the scores derived from the test items at approximately .75 and provides evidence of the index's construct validity.[33]

Data Analyses

The data were cast into a 3 X 3 X 2 completely randomized design in order to test the hypotheses and research questions. The three predictor variables were the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self which was trichotomized into three levels--low, medium, and high; rhetorical reflector which was trichotomized into three levels--low, medium, and high; and sex with two levels--male and female. The predicted variables were self-disclosure in a dyad, self-disclosure in a small group, self-disclosure to a friend, self-disclosure to a stranger, total self-disclosure, and the difference between self-disclosure to a friend and self-disclosure to a stranger. A series of statistical analyses addressed the research hypotheses and questions. Correlation coefficients were computed for the three scales on the Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale, and subsequently for the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self, rhetorical reflector, and sex with the predicted variables. Significant correlation coefficients among the predictor variables recommended the use of regression analysis and the conservative partial sums of squares. The individual cell means were subjected to a posteriori comparisons, utilizing

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RESULTS

Correlation coefficients were computed for the three scales on the rhetorical sensitivity scale. Rhetorical sensitivity and noble self were shown to be inversely correlated (r^2 = -.7282, 419 d.f., $p < .0001$), rhetorical sensitivity and rhetorical reflector were inversely correlated (r^2 = -.2238, 419 d.f., $p < .0001$), and noble self and rhetorical reflector were inversely correlated (r^2 = -.2881, 419 d.f., $p \leq .001$). The high correlation between rhetorical sensitivity and noble self suggested that the two scales might be redundant and provided concern for multicolinearity. As a result, they were combined for purposes of this analysis; because they were negatively correlated, noble self was subtracted from rhetorical sensitivity. Correlations among the three dependent and the five independent variables are provided in Table 1.

(PLACE TABLE 1 HERE.)

A significant difference occurred on self-disclosure in the dyad for the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self ($F(2, 401) = 6.5895$; $p = .0019$).
A significant difference occurred on self-disclosure in the small group for sex ($F(1,401) = 8.2727$; $p = .0045$) and for the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self ($F(2,401) = 5.9526$; $p = .0032$). A significant

difference occurred on self-disclosure to friends for sex ($F(1,401) = 12.1501$; $p = .0009$) and for the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self ($F(2,401) = 9.9802$; $p = .0002$). A significant difference occurred on self-disclosure to strangers for the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self ($F(2,401) = 3.2498$; p .0386). A significant difference occurred on total self-disclosure for the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self ($F(2,401) = 7.0098$; $p = .0014$). Finally, a significant difference occurred for the difference between self-disclosure to a friend and to a stranger for sex ($F(1,401) = 17.6540$; $p = .0001$).

All of the significant differences for the various kinds of self-disclosure on the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self suggested that as rhetorical sensitivity increased, self-disclosure decreased. Tukey's HSD test was used to further identify significant differences among the means. For self-disclosure in dyads, a significant difference was found between people high in the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self and those low in this composite (HSD = 1.6126; 401 d.f.; observed difference = 2.5750). For self-disclosure in small groups, a significant difference was found between people high in the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self and those low in this composite score (HSD = 1.7841;

401 d.f.; observed difference = 2.5578). A significant difference occurred, for self-disclosure to friends, between people high in the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self and those low in this composite score (HSD = 1.6014; 401 d.f.; observed difference = 2.9820) and between people who are moderate in the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self and those high on this dimension (HSD = 1.7499; 401 d.f.; observed difference = 1.7499). A significant difference occurred, for self-disclosure to strangers, between people high in the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self and those low on this dimension (HSD = 2.0002; 401 d.f.; observed difference = 2.1507). Finally, a significant difference occurred, for total self-disclosure, between people high in the composite of rhetorical sensitivity and noble self and those low on this composite score (HSD = 3.2076; 401 d.f.; observed difference = 5.1328).

DISCUSSION

Rhetorically sensitive (composite of rhetorical sensitivity-noble self; hereafter simply referred to as rhetorically sensitive) individuals do not distinguish between friends and strangers nor between dyads and small groups in their self-disclosure behavior. Rhetorically sensitive individuals do self-disclose differently in dyads, in small groups, with friends, with strangers, and in total disclosures than do individuals low in rhetorical

sensitivity. In every case, individuals high in rhetorical sensitivity self-disclose less than individuals low in rhetorical sensitivity. Women self-disclose more to groups and more to friends than do men. In addition, the difference between self-disclosure to dyads and groups is significant between women and men: Women self-disclose more in the group setting than in the dyad while men self-disclose more in the dyad than in the group. Finally, women self-disclose more to friends relative to strangers than do men.

These findings suggest that the Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale may not be a measure of "effective social interaction." Self-disclosure, one dimension of interpersonal competence, is inversely related to rhetorical sensitivity. Rhetorically sensitive individuals do not appear to "undulate or fluctuate" in this behavior; instead, they appear to engage in self-disclosure to a lesser degree than do persons who are low in rhetorical sensitivity. If the Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale measured appropriate self-disclosure behavior, we would expect differences in self-disclosure for the rhetorically sensitive individual, depending upon setting and the length of the relationship between the discloser and the target person. Rhetorical sensitivity appears to represent moderation in interpersonal communication rather than competence.

Some clarification of the unstable findings for sex differences occurred. Sex did not interact with rhetorical sensitivity or rhetorical reflection. Women appear to self-disclose more to friends and in a group setting than do men. While men self-disclose more in the dyad vis-a-vis the small group, women self-disclose more in the small group rather than the dyad. Women appear to exhibit greater competence in self-disclosure behavior as they self-disclose more to friends than do men and as they self-disclose more to friends relative to strangers than do men. Men appear to exhibit greater competence in self-disclosure behavior as they self-disclose more in dyads relative to the small group setting than do women.

This study examined the relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and self-disclosure. Persons high in rhetorical sensitivity appear to self-disclose less, regardless of setting or the length of the relationship with the target person. Women self-disclose more to friends and in a group setting than do men. Rhetorical sensitivity may be a measure of interpersonal communication moderation rather than interpersonal communication competence. Additional research should be completed to establish criterion-related validity for the Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale.

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TABLE 1

CORRELATIONS AMONG THE DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Variable	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Rhetorical sensitivi- - noble self	-.2178**	-.2110**	-.2249**	-.1839**	-.2274**
Rhetorical reflec- tor	-.0826	-.0957*	-.1053*	-.0676	-.0950*
Sex	-.0690	.1163*	.1453**	-.0699	.0300

*p<.05

**P<.01